20 Windows Tips For Users Old and New
ARTICLE DATE: 04.22.03

By Neil J. Rubenking

Whether your computer experience dates back to the DOS days or began with Windows XP, there's always something new to learn about the popular OS. We've collected some of our favorite tips for working in Windows. Congratulate yourself for the ones you already know, and see how many new tricks you can learn. Except where noted, these tips apply to Windows 98, Me, 2000, and XP. Some tips are applicable to Windows 95 and NT 4.0 as well.

Remember the Keyboard

Windows is a WIMP. That is, its interface is based on Windows, Icons, Menus, and Pointers. Still, taking your hand off the keyboard to grasp the mouse can disrupt your typing. And what if the mouse is unavailable, perhaps because you're troubleshooting a mouse driver problem? Almost anything you can do by clicking and dragging you can do just as well via your keyboard.

Using the Alt Tab
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Clicking on a taskbar button activates the corresponding program, but the icons are small, and the button captions are often truncated into gibberish. Press Alt-Tab repeatedly to cycle through larger icons representing open programs—even some that don't show up on the taskbar. Pressing Shift-Alt-Tab cycles the other way, in case you missed the application you wanted.

Windows Logo and Application Key Substitutes
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If you're stuck using a keyboard that lacks the Windows logo and Application (right-click) keys, you can substitute Ctrl-Esc and Shift-F10, respectively.

Find the Missing Window
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When configuration changes cause a window to stray outside the visible desktop area, haul it back using your keyboard. Alt-Spacebar invokes the window's System menu, which typically appears in the upper-left-hand corner, but with an off-screen window, appears as close as possible to the off-screen window. Press M for Move and use the Arrow keys to bring the errant window back into view (Figure 1).
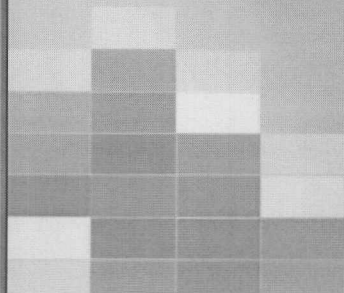
These are just a few of the powerful shortcut keys available in Windows. To learn more of them, launch Help from the Start menu and search the Index for shortcut keys.
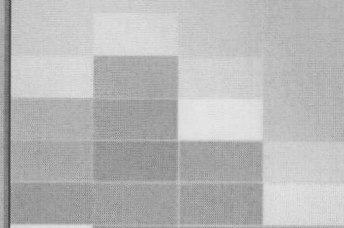
Using Disk Cleanup
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A system clogged with unnecessary files runs more slowly, and the mess makes important things harder to find. To cut through the clutter, open the Start menu and select Programs | Accessories | System Tools | Disk Cleanup. The Disk Cleanup applet calculates the amount of space you can save by emptying the Recycle Bin, deleting temporary Internet files, and (for NTFS drives) compressing old files (Figure 2). Check off the options that make sense and click on OK to regain the specified amount of hard drive space.

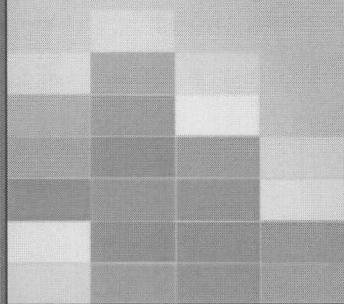## Change the Size of the Recycle Bin
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You might be surprised at the amount of space Disk Cleanup saves by emptying the Recycle Bin. By default, W allocates up to 10 percent of each drive for the Recycle Bin. This method made sense when drives were measu megabytes. But these days, you can set the amount as low as 1 percent for a large drive by right-clicking on Re choosing Properties, setting the new percentage, and clicking on OK.
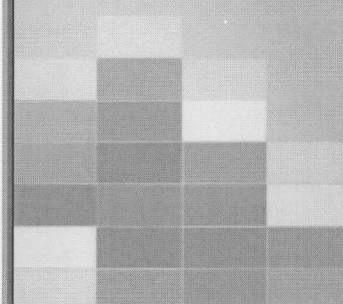
Remove Unused Programs
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To get rid of never- or seldom-used programs, lau Add/Remove Programs from the Control Panel ai each item. Don't meddle with items that are comp unfamiliar; they may be required by the system. E find a standalone application that you no longer u it! Depending on the program in question, Add/Re Programs in Windows 2000 and XP reveals the s installation, as well as how recently and how ofter used.

Cleanup Outlook Express Mail
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You should also take a look at your Outlook Express message folders. When you delete a message or move it folder, OE simply marks the original message as deleted without actually removing it. Start by right-clicking on t Items folder and emptying it. Then choose File | Folder | Compact All Folders to free up all the space occupied I marked messages. If you've never done this before, emptying the folders can take quite a while. Afterward, OE noticeably faster.

Get Hardware Details from the [

Manager
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When you run into a problem with Windows or an a
support technicians will likely ask for complex detai
your hardware configuration. You can get all the in
they request without ever opening your computer's
click on My Computer and choose Properties, or la
System applet from the Control Panel. Depending
Windows version, either click on the Device Manag
click on the Device Manager button on the Hardwa
find an exhaustive list of your system's hardware, c
type. Double-click on a device for its detailed inforr
on some platforms, a Troubleshooter option (Figure

Get Even More Hardware Information
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For a more detailed view of certain hardware elements, launch DXDIAG from the Start menu's Run dialog. Althc
designed to diagnose DirectX problems, the System, Sound, and Display tabs of the dialog provide useful infori
the CPU, memory, sound card, and display adapter—including the amount of video memory (see Figure 4).

Learn More with System Informa
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Of course, a prime source of system information i
System Information applet itself. From the Start n
Programs | Accessories | System Tools | System
The Hardware Resources and Components group
particular reveal data about the system's hardwar
not be able to interpret all of the information, but y
save a text report and pass it along to tech suppc

Learn What's Running
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Many programs install themselves so they launch automatically at Windows start-up. Whether you need them o they're using memory and CPU cycles. Windows 98, Me, and XP users can disable unnecessary background p using the Startup tab of the MSCONFIG program, which you can launch from the Start menu's Run dialog. Win 2000 users will need a third-party tool, such as PC Magazine's Startup Cop utility.

Disabling anything listed in either MSCONFIG or Startup Cop should be safe. But keep in mind that if you disab system tray, you'll lose the clock and volume control in the system tray. Also, one or more instances of LoadPo or TweakUI do no harm, because they don't remain in memory.

Identify Cryptic Processes
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You can see what's currently running on your sys launching the Task Manager by pressing Ctrl-Alt- Windows 98 and Me, you will see a simple list of applications. Windows XP and 2000 will also list a processes along with their memory usage and CF (Figure 5). Don't worry if the System Idle process be hogging the CPU; all unused CPU cycles are a to this process.

To identify cryptic processes with names like Ctfn you can get help on the Internet. There are a num Web sites that list and identify those names, suc Pacman's Portal: Startup Tips and AnswersThatV Task List Programs (Figure 6).
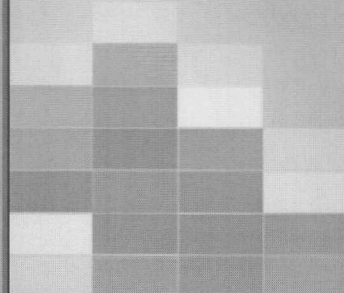
Use Windows Help
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If you have a problem with your computer, don't call for tech support right away. Select Help from the Start menu and enter the search term troubleshooters in the Index tab. If the Help system doesn't have a trouble-shooter for your particular problem, try searching on other terms related to the problem.
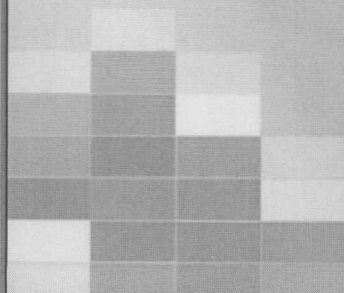
Capture Error Messages
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Many computer problems involve error messages, and it's essential to record the precise wording of these messages. In Windows 2000 and XP, pressing Ctrl-C will copy most error messages to the Clipboard. Launch Notepad, paste a copied message, and save it. Under Windows 98 and Me (or when Ctrl-C doesn't work), type the exact text of the message into Notepad for reference. (You can also take a screenshot of the error message by hitting Alt-PrintScreen, which copies the screen image to the Clipboard, and then opening Paint and pasting the image into a blank file. You now have a picture of the error message.) When copying or reporting an error message, you can omit the interminable lists of numbers found at the end of some message boxes.
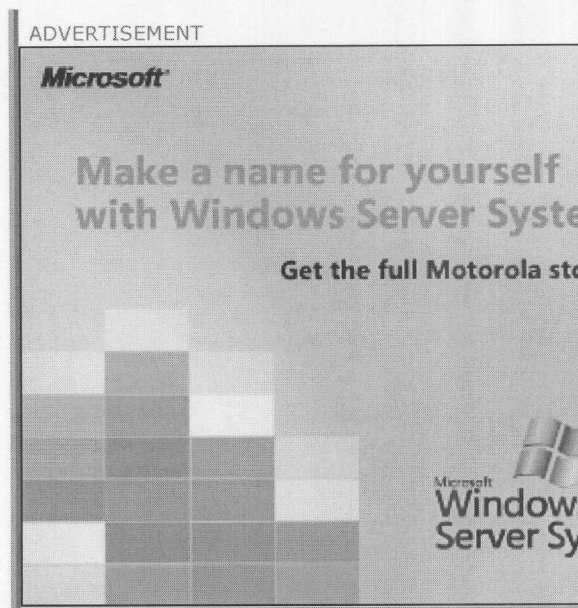
Use Microsoft Knowledge Base
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The next place to go for help is the immense Microsoft Knowledge Base. Navigate to http://support.microsoft.com and type in a few search terms that describe the difficulty—for instance, shutdown problem—or search on an exact phrase from an error message. If necessary, refine the search by selecting your version of Windows from the drop-down list provided.

If all else fails, you can call tech support and describe the problem, along with the remedies you've tried. And of course, you now know the skills to provide any system information that tech support requests.
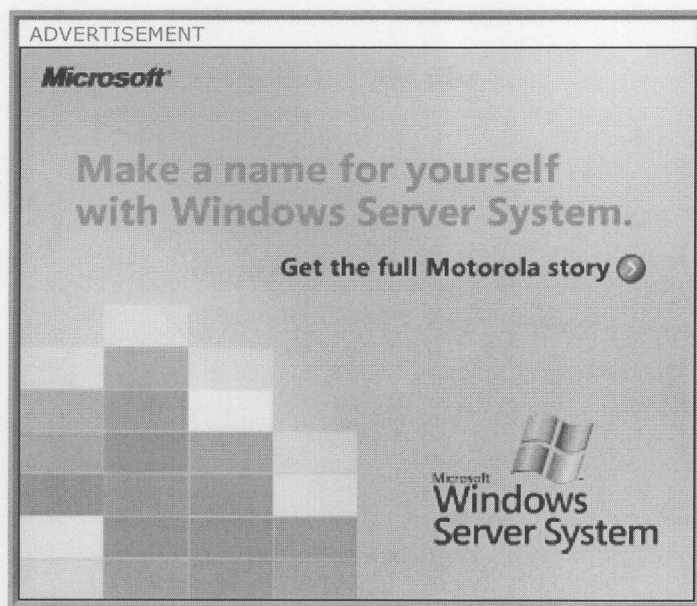
Traversing Directories with the Command Prompt

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Old-school DOS users remember launching programs and performing all their file management tasks with the command prompt. Budding advanced users will also want to learn about the powerful features still accessible in this monochrome window. Windows Explorer provides a handy view of your hard drive's file system, but the command prompt is better for certain tasks.
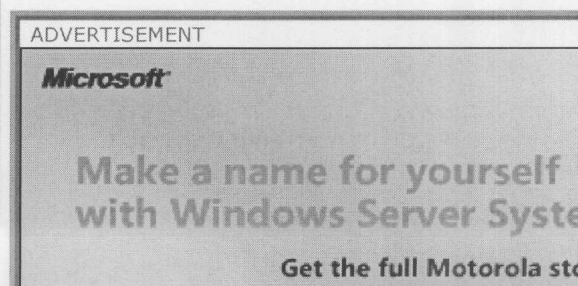
The two can even work together: When you drag a file or folder from Explorer to a command prompt window, its full path name is appended to the command line. For example, you can type CD (CD for Change Directory followed by a space) and then drag a folder to the command prompt. When you press Enter, the command prompt changes directory to the specified folder. Conversely, you can enter "explorer /e,." (explorer, space, slash, e, comma, period) at the prompt to open Windows Explorer in the folder you're working with (see Figure 7).

Using DIR Command

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The DIR command provides a directory listing of the current folder, but it omits files with Hidden and System attributes. DIR /A shows all files— regardless of their attributes. You can also use the ATTRIB command to display or change the attributes of matching files. For example, ATTRIB -H DESKTOP.INI will unhide a Desktop.ini file.

Using XCOPY
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Windows Explorer can copy selected files or folders to other locations. For a finer level of control, use the XCOI command at the command prompt. XCOPY's abilities include copying all files matching one or more file specific files changed on or after a specific date, or all files that have the archive bit set. Other options let you find and c matching files in subdirectories, copy over read-only files, retain file attributes when copying, and more. The coi XCOPY /? lists the XCOPY command's syntax, but the data fills more than one screen. For a full listing, redirec information into the file Xcopy.txt using the command XCOPY /? > XCOPY.TXT, then open Xcopy.txt in Notepa
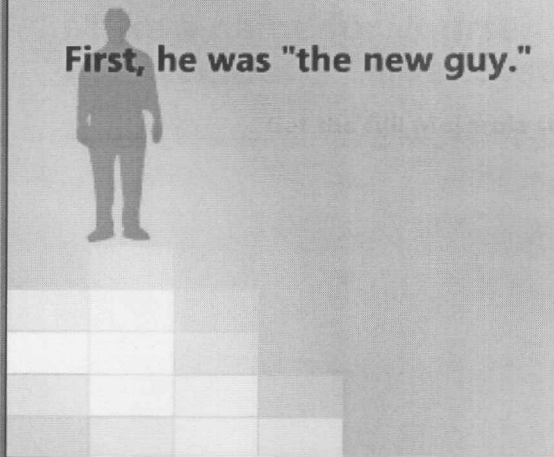
Run Programs from the Comma Prompt
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To run a program from the Command Prompt, jus name. To launch a data file, you need the START For example, START XCOPY.TXT will open the s file in Notepad.

Find Matching Files with Command Prompt
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command opens all files in the current directory whose filename is Project1, launching each in the application appropriate to its extension:

FOR %v IN (PROJECT1.*) DO START %v. The %v represents a variable; you can use any letter. For each file that matches the list of file specifications in parentheses, the command after DO repeats, substituting that file's name for the variable. With Window 2000 and XP, the FOR command is even more powerful. For a full list of its features, enter FOR/? > FORHELP.TXT and launch Forhelp.txt.

The commands we've discussed are hardly the only DOS-style functions that remain useful under Windows. To get a list of all the standard commands, enter HELP > HELP.TXT and view Help.txt in Notepad (Figure 8).